

King's killer dies denial on his lips

By **CORKY SIEMASZKO**

Daily News Staff Writer

James Earl Ray, the confessed assassin of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who later claimed he was framed, died of liver failure yesterday in a Nashville hospital.

Now some fear the 70-year-old career criminal may have taken secrets about King's murder with him to the grave.

Ray denied until the very end that he was the gunman who fatally shot King on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, telling the Daily News just two weeks ago, "I definitely didn't kill Martin Luther King."

Ray's 30-year bid for a trial to clear his name won the unlikely support in 1997 of King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and other black leaders.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as establish the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence," Mrs. King said.

King's son, Dexter, even shook Ray's hand during a televised interview last year when Ray again denied killing the hero of the civil rights movement.

"He takes with him to the grave the last little secrets about this crime," said Gerald Posner, author of "Killing the Dream," which concluded that outsiders did not help Ray plot the killing.

"And he gets the satisfaction of conning the King family into granting him an absolution before he died," Posner added.

Ray's liver disease was caused by hepatitis, apparently contracted during a blood

transfusion after being stabbed by black inmates in 1981.

He was pronounced dead at 11:36 a.m. yesterday at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital, the Tennessee Department of Correction said in a statement. An autopsy is scheduled for today.

Before he died, Ray told The News he asked to be cremated and have his ashes spread over "Europe or Ireland or somewhere."

"I don't want to be dug up every six months to see if it is really me," he said.

Ray's brother, Jerry, said the plan is to bury Ray's ashes in Ireland, birthplace of one of his grandmothers, after a private memorial service.

A product of a broken home left dirt poor by the Depression, Ray was a high school dropout who couldn't cut it in the Army, which gave him the boot in 1946 for the "lack of adaptability to military service."

The wiry loner and neat-freak, whose only known hobby was reading mystery novels, headed west to Los Angeles, where he launched his criminal career in 1949 by trying to steal a typewriter. Three years later, Ray tried to

hold up a cabby and was shot by a Chicago cop.

After two years in prison, Ray returned to his hometown of Alton, Ill., and tried to go straight.

But in 1955 he was convicted of forging money orders and sent back to the slammer for three more years.

Finally in 1960, Ray was sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary for 20 years for armed robbery and car theft.

But on April 23, 1967, Ray broke out of prison by hiding under loaves of bread in a delivery truck.

His movements during the next few months would be chronicled by police and reporters trying to understand why Ray went after King.

The skepticism that Ray may not have acted alone was fueled by the ease in which the petty criminal suddenly became the debonair Eric Starvo Galt, who took dancing lessons in Birmingham, Ala., and bartending classes in Los Angeles.

Suddenly, Ray could afford a white Mustang in which he racked up 19,000 miles on jaunts to Mexico, New Orleans and Los Angeles.

It was on one of these trips that Ray, using the name Harvey Lowmyer, bought a .30-06 Remington Gamemaster rifle in Birmingham five days before the King assassination.

On April 3, Ray checked into a Memphis flophouse under yet-another name — John Willard. Across the street was the Lorraine Motel.

The next evening, King was shot while standing on a second-floor balcony. The 39-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner died an hour after a bullet tore a 3-inch hole in his throat.

The nation was convulsed by rioting that spread through

more than 100 cities, including New York City. The murder also sparked one of the biggest manhunts in U.S. history, ending when Ray was captured in London on June 5.

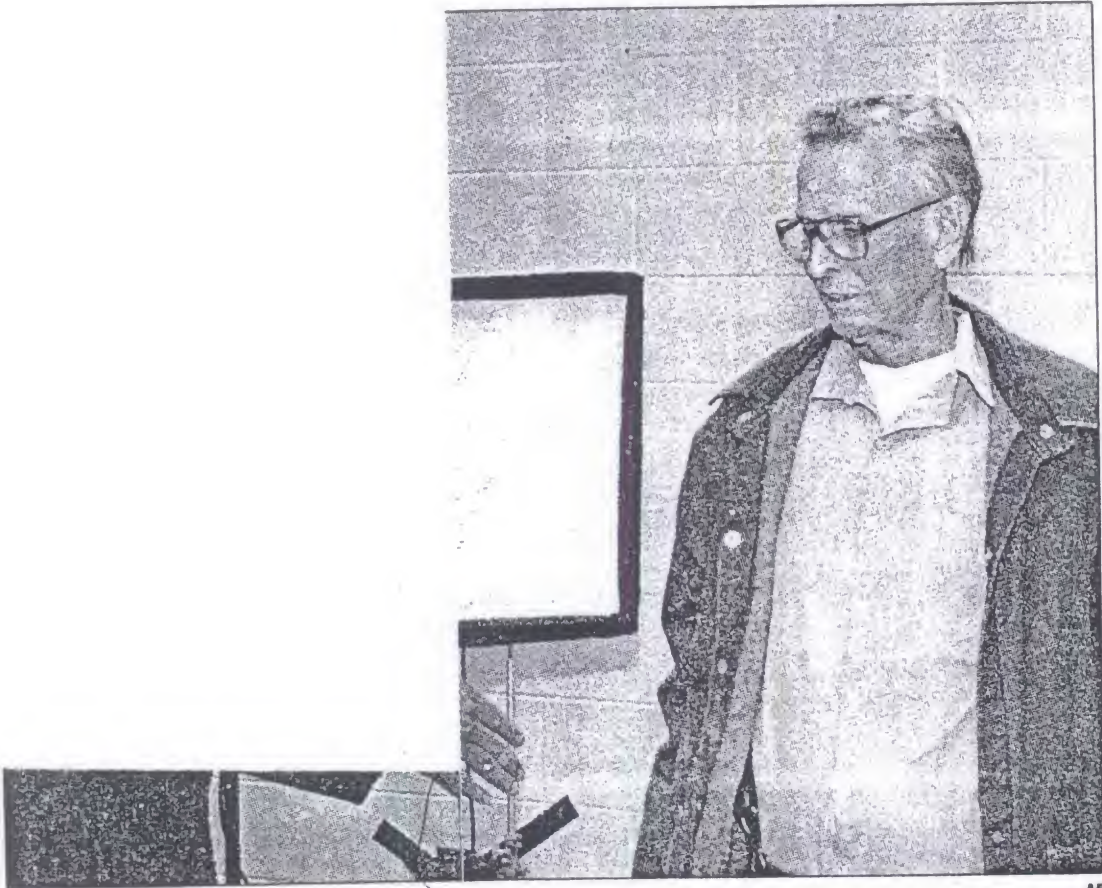
Three days after confessing, Ray began claiming that he was set up by a shadowy gun dealer he met in Montreal and knew only as Raoul. Ray insisted he was changing a tire when the shooting happened.

Numerous courts said there was no evidence anyone else was involved, and nobody else was ever charged.

The U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer. But it also found evidence that a racist group in St. Louis had put a \$50,000 bounty on King's head.

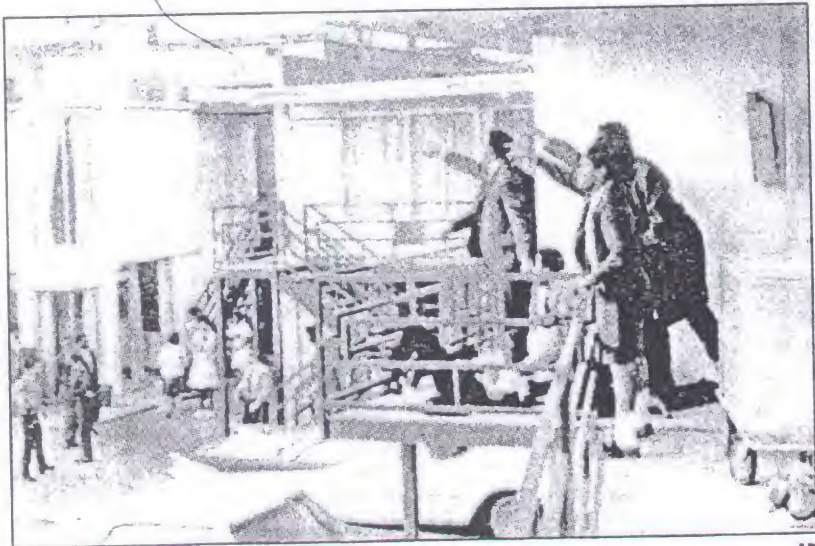
The committee's files are sealed until 2029.

With News Wire Services



AP

EXTENDING HAND to James Earl Ray, Dexter King, son of slain civil rights leader, met him in jail in March 1997. Men who were with King at the time of the shooting pointed from balcony of Lorraine Motel in Memphis (photo right) at where they believed shots came from as they stood over fallen leader on April 4, 1967. Ray had registered under false name in flophouse across the street from motel on the day before.



AP

'Tragedy': Coretta

By **CHRISENA COLEMAN**

Daily News Staff Writer

The family of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was saddened by the death of James Earl Ray yesterday — partly because it now fears it will never be sure who killed the civil rights leader.

"This is a tragedy, not only for Mr. Ray and his family, but also for the entire nation," Coretta Scott King said.

"We are more determined than ever to find the truth. It is regrettable that Mr. Ray was denied his day in court, but the American people have a right to know the truth."

The King family yesterday asked President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would "grant amnesty and immunity from prosecution for all those who come forward with information."

"We intend to do everything we can to bring it to light," said the slain leader's wife. Ray's brother Jerry said he also would continue to

fight to clear his brother's name.

Despite persistent suspicions that Ray was part of a larger conspiracy — which may even have involved the federal government — to kill King, the courts repeatedly have concluded that Ray acted alone.

Ray's death brought a mixture of anger and regret among friends and followers of King.

Hosea Williams, a former King lieutenant and Southern Christian Leadership Conference executive director, said he thought the federal government was behind King's assassination and orchestrated Ray's guilty plea to keep the truth from coming out.

"I have as great a feeling for Ray as I have for King," Williams said yesterday in Atlanta. "Both deaths were in vain, a useless and cruel act of our federal government."

Some other civil rights leaders, including the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, have said they believe Ray took part in the assassination but did not act alone.